November 2026



Iran

Update on Treatment upon Return

Center for Dokumentation
og Indsats mod Ekstremisme

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Iran – Update on Treatment upon Return

This thematic COI report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed. It should thus be weighed against other country of origin information available on the topic.

The report at hand does not include any policy recommendations. The information does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

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November 2026

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Executive summary

The deteriorating political and security situation in Iran in 2026 has increased uncertainty regarding the Iranian authorities' treatment of Iranian nationals returning from abroad. However, available information does not indicate that all Iranian returnees face consequences solely because they have lived in Europe or previously applied for asylum. The authorities' level of interest depends primarily on a person's profile, previous encounters with the authorities, and political activities abroad.

Persons who have participated in demonstrations against the Islamic Republic (IRI) or expressed criticism on social media may face questioning, arrest, detention and prosecution, particularly if their activities are known to the authorities. Persons with a visible or prominent political profile are generally considered more likely to attract the authorities' attention. However, ordinary citizens returning to Iran have reportedly been subjected to questioning with increasing frequency., e.g. about their activities abroad. The authorities may also examine returnees' electronic devices and communications, confiscate passports or impose travel restrictions. However, information on the authorities' actual treatment of returnees following the developments in 2026 remains limited.

The Iranian authorities monitor Iranian nationals living abroad, particularly persons involved in political activities or expressing criticism of the IRI. Monitoring includes surveillance of demonstrations, social media and diaspora organisations, as well as the use of advanced technologies, including facial recognition.

Since the beginning of 2026, the Iranian authorities have reportedly increased their focus on political activities among Iranians abroad, increasingly extending their monitoring to ordinary citizens. However, the extent of this monitoring remains difficult to determine, and the authorities' level of interest depends on factors such as a person's political profile, visibility and level of activity on social media. Persons engaged in prominent or sustained political activities are generally considered more likely to attract the authorities' attention than those with limited political involvement.

The Iranian authorities have also used pressure on family members in Iran as a means of influencing politically active Iranians living abroad. Family members have reportedly been subjected to threats, questioning, arrests, detention and financial pressure. The extent and severity of such pressure vary and may increase depending on the political visibility and activities of the person living abroad.

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Introduction

This thematic COI report builds on and updates selected aspects of the Danish Immigration Service's (DIS) report *Iran: Return following Sur Place Activities 2025*. The report at hand focuses on the impact of circumstances and activities occurring after an Iranian citizen has left Iran, which may include repercussions upon return to Iran as of January 2026. The report does not cover the subjects of general return procedures in Iran; consequences of conversion to Christianity abroad; return on a laissez-passer, and monitoring of European media by Iranian embassies, which were part of the previous report.

The purpose of the report is to collect updated information for use in the processing of asylum cases. The terms of reference (ToR) were prepared in collaboration with the Asylum Division of DIS and the Secretariat of the Refugee Appeals Board.

In general, there is limited information on the situation of returnees to Iran.[1] This is mainly due to the fact that returns to Iran are not monitored by international organisations, combined with a general lack of access to sources and independent human rights observers inside the country. Likewise, it is difficult to obtain clear information on whether, and if so how, the Iranian authorities monitor Iranian asylum applicants abroad.

The report is a synthesis of information obtained from different types of written sources and experts with in-depth knowledge of Iran who can assess the most likely scenarios, based on their professional experience and understanding of the country context. In the report, care has been taken to present the views of the sources as accurately and transparently as possible. The individual sources should not be held accountable for the content of the report.

It should be noted that not all statements provided by the sources have been included in the report. The inclusion of information has been based on an assessment of the degree of uncertainty expressed by the sources regarding the topic in question. The hypothetical assessments reflect the absence of direct and independently verifiable data. Nevertheless, the reader can find the full statements of the sources in the meeting minutes in Annex 1.

During the research process, two experts were consulted. The sources were informed about the purpose of the interviews, and that their statements would be included in a publicly available report. The interview minutes were sent to the sources afterwards for review and approval, giving them the opportunity to correct, amend or comment their own statements. For the sake of transparency, accuracy and reader-friendliness, the paragraphs in the minutes of the interviews in Annex 1 have consecutive numbers, which are used in the footnotes when referring to the statements of the sources. The sources were also consulted on how they

[1] An expert on civil society: 1, 22; Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 164; Landinfo, *Iran: Mottagelse og behandling av returnerte asylsøkere [Iran: Reception and treatment of returned asylum seekers]*, 22 November 2024, url, p. 6

preferred to be referred to in the report. Both interviewed sources were, in accordance to their request, granted anonymity for reasons of discretion.

The report does not contain policy recommendations and therefore cannot be taken as an expression of a particular view on what the asylum determination practice should be. The terminology used in the report should not be regarded as a reflection of any specific legal position.

The report has been prepared in accordance with the EUAA guidelines for the production of COI products.[2]

The research and editing of the report were finalised on 29 October 2026.

The thematic report is available on the website of us.dk/CDE, thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the public.

[2] EUAA, *COI Report Methodology*, 22 February 2023, url

Abbreviations

COI	Country of Origin Information
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoIS	Ministry of Intelligence and Security
NCSC	UK National Cyber Security Centre
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council
ToR	Terms of Reference

1. Background: political and security situation

The following chapter provides context and background for the situation of Iranian nationals who engage in political activities abroad and subsequently return to Iran.

1.1 January 2026 protests

The most recent protests in Iran broke out on 28 December 2025 (hereafter referred to as the "January 2026 protests"), initially driven by widespread public dissatisfaction with the country's deteriorating economic situation, including the sharp depreciation of the currency, rising inflation and declining purchasing power. The protests subsequently evolved into calls for the fall of the Islamic Republic (IRI) and spread from Tehran's bazaar and small businesses to universities and other segments of society.[3]

In response, Iranian security forces opened fire on protesters, resulting in numerous deaths, while internet access was shut down across Iran.[4] The authorities have referred to protesters as "rioters" and "terrorists" who must be suppressed,[5] and human rights organisations have reported a high number of killed protesters.[6] While Iranian authorities reported more than 3,100 deaths, Amnesty International stated that the actual death toll was likely considerably higher, with the human rights organisation HRANA reporting more than 7,000 deaths and thousands of other cases awaiting investigation.[7] As of 29 January 2026, at least 40,000 individuals had been arrested in connection with the protests.[8]

1.1.1 US and Israeli attacks on Iran

In early January 2026, US President Donald Trump threatened to intervene militarily if Iranian security forces fired on protesters.[9] Subsequently, on 28 February 2026, the US and Israel launched strikes against Iran, killing Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and several senior IRGC figures. Iran then carried out attacks against Israel and US-allied Gulf states, while the conflict also spread to Lebanon. Khamenei's son, Mojtaba Khamenei, was named his successor on 8 March 2026.[10]

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[3] Reuters, *Iran's government offers dialogue as protests spread to universities*, 30 December 2025, url; Reuters, *Iran's rial hits new low after unrest sparked by economic crisis*, 27 January 2026, url; UN, *Iran: After unprecedented violence, priority must be on gathering evidence to hold perpetrators to account*, UN *Fact-Finding Mission says*, 23 January 2026, url; BBC, *Protests and US warnings shake Iran at its weakest point in years*, 5 January 2026, url

[4] Amnesty International, *What happened at the protests in Iran?*, 26 January 2026, url; An expert on Iranian law: 2

[5] HRW, *Iranian Authorities Brutally Repressing Protests*, 6 January 2026, url; OHCHR, E*xperts urge Iran to break cycle of violence, create space for dialogue*, 13 January 2026, url; Iran International, *UN rights chief condemns Iran for branding protesters as terrorists*, 13 January, 2026, url

[6] HRW, *Iran: Growing Evidence of Countrywide Massacres*, 16 January 2026, url; Amnesty International, *Iran: Authorities unleash heavily militarized clampdown to hide protest massacres*, 23 January 2026, url

[7] DW, *Iran protest victim: 'They were shooting to kill'*, 24 August 2026, url

[8] Iran Human Rights, *Iran Protests: Arrests, Incommunicado Detention and Unknown Fate of Disappeared*, 29 January 2026, url

[9] Reuters, *Trump threatens Iran over protest crackdown as deadly unrest flares*, 3 January 2026, url

[10] BBC, *Why did US and Israel attack Iran and how long could the war last?*, 23 April 2026, url

1.2 Subsequent arrests, prosecutions and executions across Iran

Following the US and Israeli attacks on Iran, Iranian authorities arrested more than 6,000 people, including protesters, journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders, dissidents and members of ethnic and religious minorities.[11] According to a consulted source, thousands of arrested people were accused of collaboration, espionage or links with the US and Israel.[12] At the same time, there were reports of expedited prosecutions, lengthy prison sentences and politically motivated executions, as well as enforced disappearances, torture, forced confessions and lack of access to fair trials.[13]

Since the beginning of 2026, at least 58 individuals have been executed following convictions on vaguely defined national security-related charges.[14] In some cases, the death penalty was imposed for "operational action on behalf of hostile states", an offence introduced by the 2025 law on "Intensifying Punishments for Spies and Collaborators with the Zionist Regime and Hostile States" (the Espionage Law). According to sources, the law expands the scope of conduct subject to punishment, shortens procedural time limits and has been applied to accelerate proceedings resulting in death sentences for protesters, reportedly without evidence of espionage or collaboration with a hostile state.[15]

1.2.1 The Espionage Law

According to legal experts and human rights organisations, the law's broadly formulated provisions and severe penalties could lead to increased use of the death penalty, including for acts previously subject to lesser penalties or not considered espionage,[16] e.g. providing foreign media with information on protests and human rights violations.[17] According to an expert on Iranian law, the law broadens the scope of espionage-related offences by erasing the distinction between espionage and legitimate civil activity.[18]

Unlike previous legislation, the law authorises the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) to designate states and groups as hostile entities and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security

[11] Amnesty International, *Iran: Mass arbitrary arrests and political executions mark intensifying repression*, 28 May 2026, url
[12] An expert on Iranian law: 2
[13] Amnesty International, *Iran: Mass arbitrary arrests and political executions mark intensifying repression*, 28 May 2026, url; HRW, *Iran: Ongoing Unlawful Execution Campaign Against Protesters*, 10 September 2026, url
[14] OHCHR, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran**, 21 September 2026, url, pp. 9-10; HRW, *Iran: Ongoing Unlawful Execution Campaign Against Protesters*, 10 September 2026, url
[15] HRW, *Iran: Ongoing Unlawful Execution Campaign Against Protesters*, 10 September 2026, url; Iran Human Rights, *The "Law on Intensifying the Punishment for Espionage": New Tool for Fast-Tracking Executions in Iran*, 10 June 2026, url
[16] RFE/RL, *Iran Expands Penalties For Espionage Amid Surge In Executions*, 1 October 2025, url; Migrationsverket, *Iran: MR-situationen efter tolvdagarskriget [Iran: The Human Rights Situation after the Twelve-Day War]*, 12 December 2025, url, p. 10
[17] An expert on Iranian law: 8; Amnesty International, *Iran: End escalating campaign of arbitrary executions and death sentences against protesters*, 28 July 2026, url
[18] An expert on Iranian law: 8

(MoIS) to identify hostile networks.[19] Intelligence, espionage or operational activities conducted on behalf of entities designated as hostile are punishable by death and confiscation of property.[20] Moreover, contact with individuals or entities designated as hostile may result in criminal prosecution and, when treated as intelligence gathering or espionage, may be punishable by death.[21]

In July 2026, the MoIS issued a directive concerning the implementation of the note to Article 4 of the Espionage Law. The directive identifies entities falling within the categories of "hostile networks", "hostile human-media" and "hostile online pages":

- The first section lists 44 media outlets and networks, e.g. Persian-language medias Radio Zamaneh, IranWire, BBC Persian, Voice of America and Iran International.[22]
- The second section lists 61 individuals under the category "hostile human-media". In addition to a number of activists and social media users based outside Iran, the list includes prominent individuals, e.g. Masih Alinejad, Shirin Ebadi and Reza Pahlavi, as well as journalists, political and civil society activists and media figures.[23]
- The third section identifies 310 webpages, channels and user accounts on platforms including Instagram, Telegram, X/Twitter and YouTube as well as standalone websites. The list includes various websites, news channels, organisations and groups such as HRANA, Iran Human Rights, the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, the Kurdistan Human Rights Organization and ARTICLE 19.[24]

The designated entities were identified on the basis of criteria including "affiliation and links with the Zionist regime and terrorist groups; promoting and providing instruction on terrorist acts; promoting violence; creating insecurity; and adopting a hostile approach towards the IRI". The list of designated entities will be updated continuously.[25]

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[19] An expert on Iranian law: 9; RFE/RL, *Iran Expands Penalties For Espionage Amid Surge In Executions*, 1 October 2025, url

[20] RFE/RL, *Iran Expands Penalties For Espionage Amid Surge In Executions*, 1 October 2025, url

[21] Amnesty International, *Iran: End escalating campaign of arbitrary executions and death sentences against protesters*, 28 July 2026, url

[22] Radio Zamaneh, *وزارت اطلاعات فهرست رسانه‌ها و «انسان‌رسانه‌های معاند» را منتشر کرد [The Ministry of Intelligence published a list of media outlets and "hostile media actors"]*, 14 July 2026, url; IranWire, *وزارت اطلاعات فهرست «انسان‌رسانه‌ها» و رسانه‌های «معاند» را منتشر کرد [The Ministry of Intelligence published a list of "media actors" and "hostile" media outlets]*, 14 July 2026, url

[23] Radio Zamaneh, *وزارت اطلاعات فهرست رسانه‌ها و «انسان‌رسانه‌های معاند» را منتشر کرد [The Ministry of Intelligence published a list of media outlets and "hostile media actors"]*, 14 July 2026, url; IranWire, *وزارت اطلاعات فهرست «انسان‌رسانه‌ها» و رسانه‌های «معاند» را منتشر کرد [The Ministry of Intelligence published a list of "media actors" and "hostile" media outlets]*, 14 July 2026, url

[24] Radio Zamaneh, *وزارت اطلاعات فهرست رسانه‌ها و «انسان‌رسانه‌های معاند» را منتشر کرد [The Ministry of Intelligence published a list of media outlets and "hostile media actors"]*, 14 July 2026, url; IranWire, *وزارت اطلاعات فهرست «انسان‌رسانه‌ها» و رسانه‌های «معاند» را منتشر کرد [The Ministry of Intelligence published a list of "media actors" and "hostile" media outlets]*, 14 July 2026, url

[25] Radio Zamaneh, *وزارت اطلاعات فهرست رسانه‌ها و «انسان‌رسانه‌های معاند» را منتشر کرد [The Ministry of Intelligence published a list of media outlets and "hostile media actors"]*, 14 July 2026, url

DIS has not been able to access the directive through official government channels. It was only possible to identify a reproduction of the directive and the accompanying list of individuals, organisations and media outlets on the websites Abdi Media and Tabnak. DIS is therefore unable to verify the authenticity of the directive and the list.[26]

[26] Abdi Media, *وزارت اطلاعات طی نامه‌ای به دادستان کل کشور لیست «شبکه ها و انسان رسانه‌ها و حساب‌های کاربری معاند» اعلام کرد + لیست [The Ministry of Intelligence announced, in a letter to the Prosecutor General, a list of "hostile networks, media actors and user accounts" + list],* 15 July 2026, url; Tabnak, *فهرست کامل مصادیق جاسوسی و همکاری با رسانه‌های معاند [Comprehensive list of acts constituting espionage and cooperation with hostile media]*, 14 July 2026, url

2. Monitoring of Iranian citizens abroad

Iran has 16 intelligence organisations, of which the MoIS and the Intelligence Organisation of the IRGC are among the most prominent.[27]

Both MoIS and the IRGC have been reported to operate outside Iran, including through officers working covertly under diplomatic cover. Their activities abroad include collecting information on individuals whom the Iranian authorities consider opponents and coordinating activities involving proxy actors. According to an assessment published in May 2023 by the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET), Iranian intelligence services also conduct intelligence activities targeting Iranians living in Europe, including Denmark.[28]

Political and security tensions during 2026 have reportedly led the Iranian authorities to pay increased attention to the political activities of Iranians living abroad, and to intensify their monitoring of the Iranian diaspora.[29]

2.1 Profiles of individuals abroad subject to monitoring

According to various sources, Iranian authorities monitor dissidents living abroad. Those monitored include prominent Iranians, journalists working for opposition media outlets abroad, political activists, opposition groups, human rights activists, participants in demonstrations abroad, website administrators, and social media activists.[30] However, according to an August 2026 report by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), it is difficult to determine the exact scale of this monitoring.[31]

An expert on Iranian law consulted by DIS has assessed that the authorities do not appear to systematically monitor every Iranian abroad. Visibility, previous history, political significance, audience size and the nature of the person's activities are important factors in determining the level of attention.[32]

However, another consulted source assessed that, since January 2026, the Iranian authorities have become more sensitive to political activity among the diaspora, including activities by

[27] BFA Staatendokumentation, *Länderinformationen der Staatendokumentation: Iran; aus dem COI-CMS; Version 13*, 6 August 2026, url

[28] BFA Staatendokumentation, *Länderinformationen der Staatendokumentation: Iran; aus dem COI-CMS; Version 13*, 6 August 2026, url; PET, *Assessment of the espionage threat*, May 2023, url, p.7; Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 86

[29] Foreign Policy, *Iran is still fighting a war against dissidents abroad*, 7 July 2026, url; The National News, *Six seconds is enough to kill': The exiled Iranian dissidents living with the threat of the regime's revenge,* 31 July 2026, url; Expert on civil society: 11; Expert on Iranian law: 18

[30] Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 86; Expert on Iranian law: 19, 11; Expert on civil society: 6, 11, 14; Foreign Policy, *Iran is still fighting a war against dissidents abroad*, 7 July 2026, url; The National News, *Six seconds is enough to kill': The exiled Iranian dissidents living with the threat of the regime's revenge,* 31 July 2026, url

[31] Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 86

[32] Expert on Iranian law: 12

ordinary individuals rather than only prominent opposition figures. The interest in ordinary members of the diaspora was described as a relatively new development. As part of broader technological developments, automated tools have made it easier to collect information on ordinary citizens. Previously, limited human resources meant that the authorities had to focus on prominent activists. The authorities can now collect and store information on more individuals. Nevertheless, according to the source, the authorities remain more interested in organisers, influencers and individuals who may have a political impact than in those who simply participate in an event.[33]

Iranian authorities monitor anti-government demonstrations abroad, including by observing, photographing or filming participants. This does not necessarily mean that every person attending a demonstration is identified or individually monitored, according to a consulted source.[34]

The authorities are particularly interested in political activity and content that is critical of the Iranian government, supports opposition movements, criticises senior officials, or concerns protests, human rights abuses or minority rights. They may also be interested in individuals who are seen as cooperating with foreign governments or media considered hostile to Iran. The level of attention can depend on how often a person is active, how widely their content is shared and whether the person is already known to the authorities.[35] A person does not have to be an organiser to attract the authorities' attention. Attention is more likely if a person has a visible or active role, for example by organising or speaking at demonstrations, participating frequently, appearing in the media, regularly sharing political content online or having a large social media following. In contrast, occasional participants and people who make only isolated political posts are less likely to attract attention.[36]

Liking or sharing political content can also attract attention. However, an isolated "like" or "share" by an ordinary person is less likely to attract the same attention as repeated posts, widely shared material or activity by a person who already has a prominent profile.[37]

Monitoring is not limited to political demonstrations. The authorities may also take an interest in diaspora networks, organisations and gatherings that they associate with opposition groups, minority movements, civil society, journalism or other sensitive groups. There is less information suggesting that ordinary non-political social gatherings among Iranians abroad are regularly monitored.[38]

However, there is no reliable information on whether the Iranian authorities monitor gatherings among the Iranian diaspora in general, including gatherings held for non-political

[33] Expert on civil society: 11-12, 14-15, 18
[34] Expert on Iranian law: 20
[35] Expert on Iranian law: 21-22
[36] Expert om Iranian law: 21; Expert on civil society: 15
[37] Expert on Iranian law: 22
[38] Expert on Iranian law: 23

purposes that may nevertheless be considered sensitive by the authorities.[39] Technological developments have made large-scale monitoring easier and less resource-intensive. The Iranian authorities use AI-assisted tools and facial-recognition technology to process publicly available videos and photographs from sources such as Instagram, X/Twitter, YouTube, as well as European and Iranian diaspora media covering demonstrations. Such material can potentially be compared with information in official databases containing photographs of Iranian citizens, making it possible to identify individuals participating in demonstrations abroad, including those who are not public figures.[40]

Iranian authorities have used cyber operations to gain access to the private communications and devices of dissidents, activists and journalists abroad. This includes sophisticated phishing and hacking attempts, in which targets may be tricked through messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram into providing access or downloading malicious software.[41] According to the UK National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), Iranian state-linked actors have used spyware capable of accessing contacts, emails and social media messages, as well as capturing screen content and accessing a device's microphone.[42]

In September 2026, the Iranian authorities launched a new platform known as Alaj, which reportedly enables members of the public to provide information that may assist in identifying Iranians residing abroad whom the authorities consider to be acting against Iran's interests. This includes individuals who advocate sanctions or military action against Iran, as well as persons affiliated with "separatist groups". The platform was promoted on Iranian state television, giving it greater public exposure.[43]

The platform reportedly publishes information about Iranians residing abroad, including their names and photographs. In some cases, additional personal information, such as national identification numbers, dates of birth and fathers' names, has also been published. Moreover, individuals identified through Alaj may be subject to measures including asset freezes in Iran and restrictions on access to consular and citizenship-related services.[44] According to a consulted source, the authorities claim to have prosecuted a number of individuals reported via this platform, but it was not possible for the source to verify this claim.[45]

[39] Expert on civil society: 18
[40] Expert on civil society: 13, 16, 19
[41] Expert on civil society: 16
[42] NCSC, *UK and allies expose spyware used by Iranian state actors to target dissidents, activists and journalists,* 15 September 2026, url; Aljazeera, *UK, US, Netherlands warn of Iranian spyware targeting dissidents,* 15 September 2026, url
[43] Iran Internation, *Islamic Republic asks public to identify opponents abroad*, 15 September 2026, url; Iran Wire, *"Alaj": The Rise of Crowdsourced Surveillance Platforms in Iran*, 16 September 2026, url; The National News, *Iran begins new push to 'identify and punish traitors' living abroad,* 14 September 2026, url; Expert on civil society: 11
[44] Iran Internation, *Islamic Republic asks public to identify opponents abroad*, 15 September 2026, url; Iran Wire, *"Alaj": The Rise of Crowdsourced Surveillance Platforms in Iran*, 16 September 2026, url
[45] Expert on civil society: 11

According to the news outlets, the platform's website was allegedly suspended shortly after attracting public attention and media coverage in mid-September 2026.[46]

Iranian authorities have also used criminal networks abroad to target prominent critics and activists in the diaspora. These networks have been linked to surveillance and intimidation, as well as plots and violent attacks against individuals perceived as opponents of the Iranian authorities. Reports indicate that criminal groups and individuals in several European countries have been recruited to carry out such activities on behalf of Iran.[47]

[46] Radio Farda, *سامانه امنیتی «علاج»، پس از اختلال در خارج از ایران، در داخل کشور هم از دسترس خارج شد [The "Elaj" security system, after experiencing disruptions outside Iran, has now also become inaccessible inside the country]*, 17 September 2026, url; Iran Internation, *Islamic Republic asks public to identify opponents abroad*, 15 September 2026, url;

[47] The New Yorker, *Iran Is Using Foreign Criminals to Attack Its Critics Oversea,* 24 August 2026, url; BBC News, *Iran using criminal gangs for hit jobs abroad, court papers show,* 15 May 2025, url; Iran International, *Iran deployed Swedish gangs to target enemies abroad – broadcaster,* 21 June 2025, url; Expert on civil society: 21

3. Treatment of family members in Iran

Iranian authorities have used family members in Iran to put pressure on politically active Iranians living abroad. Relatives of dissidents living abroad have reportedly been subjected to arrests, summonses and other forms of pressure,[48] e.g. phone calls and warnings, surveillance, interrogation, threats, employment or financial pressure, travel bans/passport confiscation, prosecution and detention. In more serious cases, torture or other ill-treatment has been reported. According to an expert on Iranian law, the intensity varies considerably and can increase when the activist abroad continues or becomes more prominent.[49]

In April 2026, AP News reported that relatives of Iranian opposition figures abroad have been detained and threatened with seizure of their property. Other reports indicate that family members in Iran have also been subjected to pressure in connection with their relatives' participation in demonstrations abroad.[50]

According to a consulted source, family members who may be affected primarily include parents, spouses, children and siblings. Other more distant relatives may, however, also be affected, particularly where they maintain contact with the person abroad.[51]

A consulted source stated that this practice continues. The source had first-hand knowledge of cases involving high-profile women's rights activists living abroad whose relatives in Iran, including parents, siblings and, in one case, a son, have been subjected to intimidation intended to pressure the activists to stop their activities. The source could not recall similar cases involving low-profile activists.[52]

Family members are more likely to be affected when the person abroad is a prominent dissident, protest organiser, journalist, human rights activist, opposition member or other public critic of the Iranian authorities. Moreover, relatives in Iran have also been threatened because of the activities of well-known online activists abroad. The consulted source could not recall similar cases involving low-profile activists.[53]

[48] Expert on civil society: 23; Expert on Iranian law: 24; Hengaw, *Fourteen days after arrest, fate of Shahram Amini remains unknown,* 20 May 2026, url
[49] Expert on Iranian law: 25
[50] AP News, *Outspoken Iranians overseas say their loved ones are being detained back home,* 6 April 2026, url; Iran Wire, *Ehsan Rezapour: Returned from Germany, Arrested, Tortured, and Died in Iran*, 29 May 2026, url
[51] Expert on Iranian law: 26
[52] Expert on civil society: 23-24
[53] Expert on Iranian law: 27

4. Treatment of returnees

According to a report published by the Austrian COI unit in August 2026, in light of recent security developments in Iran, including the war with Israel and the US, the Iranian authorities' practices towards returnees may change. This possibility should also be considered in the context of the January 2026 protests, during which the authorities reportedly used substantially greater levels of violence than during the protests of 2022–2023.[54]

According to a source consulted by the Dutch MFA in June 2026, there was no information indicating that returning Iranians faced greater scrutiny solely because they had returned from the West in connection with the war.[55] However, a source consulted by DIS in September 2026 assessed that the political and security deterioration in Iran during 2026 appears to have increased the potential consequences for some returnees from Europe, particularly people who already have a profile that could attract the attention of the Iranian authorities. However, available information does not indicate that every Iranian returning from Europe will automatically face consequence because they have lived in Europe, claimed asylum there, or returned after an unsuccessful asylum claim.[56]

According to the Dutch MFA, most Iranians do not experience problems upon return, particularly if they travel with a valid passport and have had no political profile or activities abroad.[57] Contrary to this, an expert on civil society noted that ordinary citizens returning to Iran were increasingly questioned, e.g. about their activities abroad, places visited and persons met. The intensity of questioning varies and can be relatively mild, but questioning itself has been reported in a broad range of cases. The source had not heard of ordinary, non-activist returnees being arrested and was not able to assess how a high-profile protest organiser or a similarly prominent opposition activist would be treated upon return.[58]

Several cases of detention following return have been reported, e.g. for participation in protests abroad.[59] Returnees could be required to provide passwords to their social media accounts when authorities access their phones or laptops[60] or be summoned for further

[54] BFA Staatendokumentation, *Länderinformationen der Staatendokumentation: Iran; aus dem COI-CMS; Version 13*, 6 August 2026, url
[55] Expert on Iranian law: 1; Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 167
[56] Expert on Iranian law: 1
[57] Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 164
[58] Expert on civil society: 5, 20
[59] IranWire, *Ehsan Rezapour: Returned from Germany, Arrested, Tortured, and Died in Iran*, 29 May 2026, url; Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 169
[60] Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 167; Expert on Iranian law: 16

questioning after arrival.[61] The expert on civil society described the practice of electronic devices being checked as inconsistent.[62]

Checks can extend beyond social media.[63] If a returnee is detained or comes under suspicion, the authorities may examine devices and communications, potentially gaining access to downloaded books, documents, photographs, messages, contacts, browsing material or other stored files, particularly if they contain political, religious or other material considered sensitive by the authorities. According to the expert on Iranian law, there is no information that all returnees routinely have their devices or downloaded books checked; more intrusive searches appear particularly relevant in cases where an individual has already attracted the attention or suspicion of the authorities.[64]

Passport confiscation has occurred in return cases[65] and is not necessarily followed by prosecution. In some cases, passports can be confiscated and later restored, while in other cases, the confiscation can continue indefinitely.[66]

4.1 Factors affecting the treatment of returnees

According to an expert on Iranian law, the heightened security situation may have implications for returnees, as the Iranian authorities conduct border screening. While ordinary returnees should be distinguished from those with additional factors that may attract the authorities' attention, asylum applicants whose asylum applications are known to the Iranian authorities may be questioned about their asylum claim and political or religious activities abroad. Authorities may also obtain information through relatives, electronic communications and social media. Factors impacting such individuals include political opposition or Kurdish political activity, demonstrations abroad, critical social media activity, religious conversion or proselytising, previous adverse attention from security authorities, dual nationality, and perceived links to foreign states.[67]

The source assessed that, in light of the deteriorating political and security situation, a returnee's individual profile has become increasingly important in determining how they may be treated by the Iranian authorities, as not all returnees from Europe are necessarily affected in the same way. The source was not aware of any cases of returnees being questioned, detained or prosecuted upon return since January 2026.[68] The expert on civil society assessed

[61] Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 167
[62] Expert on civil society: 7
[63] Expert on Iranian law: 16; Expert on civil society: 7
[64] Expert on Iranian law: 16-17
[65] Expert on civil society: 8; NYT, *'It Feels Like I'm in a Nightmare': Inside the First Deportation Flight to Iran*, 11 November 2025, url; Iran International, *Iranians recount fear, alleged abuse in US deportation flights to Iran - NYT*, 12 November 2025, url
[66] Expert on civil society: 8
[67] Expert on Iranian law: 3-4
[68] Expert on Iranian law: 5, 7

that the treatment of returnees had become increasingly unpredictable and that there was no clear threshold for when a returnee might attract the attention of the authorities.[69]

According to the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, opposition members and critics of the Iranian authorities may face arbitrary arrest and prosecution when travelling to Iran. Iranian intelligence services use targeted approaches aimed at persuading such individuals to cease critical activities or to cooperate with the security apparatus. Questioning may last several days and involve significant pressure.[70]

4.1.1 Asylum applicants

According to a source cited by the Dutch MFA, if a person has applied for asylum abroad and the authorities are aware of it, the person will almost routinely be questioned at the airport or required to report to the authorities a few days later. Former asylum applicants are often held for several hours and subsequently released. In some cases, they are released on bail where circumstances remain unclear and the authorities seek to prevent them from leaving the country again.[71]

Returnees could encounter problems if registered as wanted or if appearing on lists maintained by the Immigration and Passport Police or the IRGC, e.g. asylum applicants from Europe with a pending case or a sentence awaiting enforcement. Upon return, they could face measures such as confiscation of passports, questioning, travel bans, arrest and detention.[72]

According to the Australian DFAT's 2023 report, Iranian authorities pay little attention to rejected asylum applicants upon their return to Iran.[73] In addition, the Dutch MFA's 2022 report, stated that Iranian authorities are generally unaware of statements made by Iranian nationals during asylum procedures abroad. However, according to the same report, the Iranian authorities are aware that asylum applications often involve criticism of the Iranian government and that some applicants may provide false information to support their claims.[74]

A source consulted in September 2026 stated that Iranian authorities appear to be aware that some Iranian asylum applicants abroad engage in demonstrations, social media activity or other political activity partly or wholly to strengthen their asylum claims. The authorities may take the nature and visibility of those activities into account when assessing a returnee. The available evidence does not establish a general practice of adverse treatment solely because an individual has applied for asylum abroad, nor does participation in demonstrations perceived as

[69] Expert on civil society: 6
[70] BfV, *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2025 [Annual Report on the Protection of the Constitution 2025]*, June 2026, url, pp. 369-370
[71] Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, pp. 167-168
[72] Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, pp. 166-167
[73] DFAT, *DFAT COUNTRY INFORMATION REPORT IRAN*, 24 July 2023, Version 2, url, p. 40
[74] Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran,* May 2022, url, pp. 86-87

opportunistic automatically lead to adverse treatment. The key factor is how the authorities perceive the individual and their activities, including whether those activities are known or can be discovered by the authorities, their prominence and nature, any previous adverse interest, and whether the authorities perceive the returnee as a genuine political or security threat.[75]

According to the expert on civil society, the Iranian authorities have traditionally been aware that some Iranian asylum seekers participate in political activities abroad, including demonstrations, partly to strengthen their asylum claims, and have taken this into account when deciding whether to take action against them upon return. The expert did not have updated information on how the authorities currently handle such cases but assessed that the situation may have changed since January 2026.[76]

4.1.2 Activity on social media and participation in protests abroad

Increased political tensions and repression since January 2026 have heightened the significance of online criticism. The expert on Iranian law assessed that the authorities monitor online activity, and returnees may face harassment, arrest, detention, ill-treatment or criminal charges if their online activity comes to the authorities' attention. This may particularly be the case if the activities are repeated, prominent or widely circulated, or if the person already has a profile of interest. Low-profile activity that has not attracted the authorities' attention is less likely to have consequences.[77]

Since January 2026, participation in anti-IRI protests abroad can lead to adverse treatment upon return, particularly if the individual's participation is known to the authorities. This may include questioning, harassment, arrest, detention, prosecution, travel restrictions and potentially ill-treatment or torture. The expert on Iranian law assessed that organisers, prominent or repeated participants, persons identified in photographs or media, opposition activists and those already known to the authorities have greater exposure to adverse treatment. Ordinary participants who attend infrequently, have no role and receive no publicity are generally considered less likely to be identified. However, the source was unaware of publicly documented cases in 2026 of returnees arrested solely for participating in a protest abroad.[78]

4.1.3 Kurds

According to the Dutch MFA, ethnic background does not in itself play a role upon return.[79]

Consulted sources stated that political activity abroad may result in greater exposure to adverse treatment for certain ethnic minorities, particularly Kurds, who have historically attracted significant state attention due to the size and organisation of the Kurdish diaspora and the

[75] Expert on Iranian law: 10
[76] Expert on civil society: 22
[77] Expert on Iranian law: 13
[78] Expert on Iranian law: 14-15
[79] Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 167

broader political context. This heightened attention predates the recent protests. One source had, however, not seen examples of Kurds returning who have faced issues since January 2026.[80]

4.1.4 Women who refuse to conform to IRI norms

According to the Dutch MFA, being a single woman does not in itself play a role upon return.[81] Regarding women who have participated in political activities abroad and do not wish to adhere to Islamic norms upon return to Iran, an expert on Iranian law stated that the same considerations apply as those described in the section on factors affecting treatment upon return.[82]

Women who return and do not wear the hijab may currently face a less restrictive reaction by the authorities than in earlier periods. The expert on civil society knew women who had visited or returned to Iran during the preceding 6-7 months, both before and after the recent war, who had been able to enter government offices and conduct official business without wearing a hijab. It remained uncertain whether this reflected a lasting change or a tactical easing of social restrictions. The same source was not aware of any individual case concerning women who had been politically active abroad, but believed that politically active women would be treated the same as other active diaspora individuals.[83]

4.2 Recent cases of return

In 2025 and 2026, US and Iranian authorities coordinated three flights returning more than 100 Iranian nationals from the US to Iran.[84] Some of the returnees were publicly known and had a significant record of political activism against the Iranian authorities.[85] Emails reportedly indicated that Iranian officials influenced passenger lists and that US authorities accommodated last-minute changes requested by Iran. It was unclear whether those added at Iran's request had consented to return. Some returnees had reportedly sought asylum in the US, and others stated that they were returned against their will. According to a July 2026 lawsuit, 11 Iranian nationals in US immigration detention stated that they were required to meet Iranian officials who knew details of their asylum claims. A related lawsuit filed by Iranian asylum applicants alleges that US authorities unlawfully shared confidential information on Iranian asylum applicants with the Iranian government.[86]

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[80] Expert on civil society: 10; Expert on Iranian law: 3-4

[81] Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Algemeen ambtsbericht Iran [General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran]*, August 2026, url, p. 167

[82] Expert on Iranian law: 6

[83] Expert on civil society: 9

[84] AP, *A quiet channel between ICE and Iran shaped deportation flights, newly released emails show*, 21 August 2026, url; Expert on civil society: 2

[85] Expert on civil society: 2

[86] AP, *A quiet channel between ICE and Iran shaped deportation flights, newly released emails show*, 21 August 2026, url

One deportee told the London-based Iranian TV station Iran International that returnees had feared ill-treatment upon arrival in Iran. IRGC intelligence officials, however, reportedly asked them to complete forms explaining their stay in the US before returning their documents and passports.[87] IRGC intelligence subsequently summoned several deportees for questioning and confiscated the passports of at least three.[88] The expert on civil society had followed the cases but had not been able to establish what happened to the individuals after their return to Iran.[89]

According to IranWire, an Iranian national who had sought asylum and lived in Germany for 15 years returned to Iran in February 2026. He had participated in anti-government protests in Germany. Upon arrival in Tehran, his passport was reportedly confiscated, and he was questioned by interrogators with detailed knowledge of his activities in Germany. In March, he was reportedly detained by Basij forces and released with injuries attributed by IranWire to ill-treatment in detention. Following a further summons by a security agency, he set himself on fire and died in April 2026.[90]

In another case, an Iranian national who participated in the 2022 "Women, Life, Freedom" protests, during which he was blinded in one eye by Iranian security forces, subsequently left for Germany. There, he continued his political activities, including attending opposition gatherings in support of the royalist opposition leader Reza Pahlavi and speaking at a protest in Munich. He later returned voluntarily to Iran and was arrested in April 2026. In August 2026, a Revolutionary Court reportedly sentenced him to death on charges including "corruption on Earth" and political activities.[91]

BBC Persian reported the case of a pro-monarchy protester who returned to Iran from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and was reportedly arrested in Tehran. The individual was, according to their own private network, allegedly subjected to physical abuse during interrogation and faced charges related to the protests. BBC Persian was unable to independently verify the charges or the status of the case.[92]

In August 2026, Iranian authorities had compiled lists of more than 100 cultural, artistic and intellectual individuals living abroad to facilitate their return to Iran. It was not specified whether security and judicial authorities had agreed to their unhindered entry and departure or provide assurances against arrest, interrogation or travel restrictions.[93] Several prominent diaspora figures previously critical of the authorities, including some who had reportedly been granted asylum abroad, have recently returned voluntarily to Iran. They generally held strong

[87] Iran International, *Deportee recounts chains, mistreatment and suicide bid on US flight to Iran*, 4 October 2025, url
[88] NYT, *'It Feels Like I'm in a Nightmare': Inside the First Deportation Flight to Iran*, 11 November 2025, url; Iran International, *Iranians recount fear, alleged abuse in US deportation flights to Iran - NYT*, 12 November 2025, url
[89] Expert on civil society: 2
[90] IranWire, *Ehsan Rezapour: Returned from Germany, Arrested, Tortured, and Died in Iran*, 29 May 2026, url
[91] RFE/RL, *Blinded By Iranian Security Forces, A Protester Now Faces The Death Sentence*, 4 September 2026, url; Iran International, *Protester blinded in one eye sentenced to death after return to Iran*, 1 September 2026, url
[92] BBC Persian, *از امید به تغییر تا زندان و خودسوزی؛ روایت دو معترض بازگشته به ایران [From hope for change to imprisonment and self-immolation: the stories of two protesters who returned to Iran]*, 6 June 2026, url
[93] IranWire, *Culture Ministry Submits Return List of 100 Overseas Intellectuals*, 27 August 2026, url

anti-war positions. At the time of the interview, no action was known to have been taken against them, and some remained publicly active after returning. However, some had been criticised by hardline newspapers, and possible future action by state or security bodies remained uncertain.[94]

[94] Expert on civil society: 3-4

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Annex 1 – Meeting minutes

Online meeting with an expert on civil society, 21 September 2026

About the source

The source works with programming, media development and civil society capacity building.

Treatment of returnees upon return to Iran

1. Information on return to Iran is currently difficult to obtain because relatively few people are returning and because of the broader restrictions on access to information.

2. Two developments during the past year were highlighted in relation to returns, which are different to previous years. First, media reports indicated that a number of Iranians detained by US immigration authorities, including asylum seekers, were returned to Iran, reportedly via Kuwait. Some of these returnees were publicly known and had a significant record of political activism against the Iranian authorities. The source had followed these cases but had not been able to establish what happened to the individuals after their return to Iran.

3. Second, during the preceding two months, several well-known Iranian diaspora figures who had previously been politically active or critical of the Iranian authorities returned voluntarily to Iran. These individuals had generally taken strong anti-war positions and had opposed both a US-Israeli military campaign and pro-war elements of the Iranian diaspora. Domestic discussions had indicated that the Iranian authorities were seeking to facilitate the return or temporary visits of some such figures. Those who returned included the singer Mohsen Namjoo as well as a satirist and political commentators. At least some had reportedly previously been granted political asylum abroad.

4. The voluntary returnees were well-known public figures and, at the time of the interview, no action was known to have been taken against them. Some remained active on social media, participated in public events or gave online lectures after returning to Iran. One of the returnees had also expressed criticism of the Iranian government at a public event while maintaining a strong anti-war position. Hardline newspapers had nevertheless begun criticising some of the returnees. It therefore remained uncertain whether other parts of the state or security apparatus might take action against them at a later stage. In the source's assessment, facilitating these returns could form part of an attempt to include nationalist and anti-war diaspora figures in a broader political conversation.

5. Questioning of persons arriving in Iran has become more extensive during the preceding four to five months. Information received by the source indicated that even ordinary citizens returning after short trips abroad could be questioned about where

they had been, whom they had met and what they had intended to do. Iranian citizens residing abroad, particularly in Western countries such as the United States and Canada, had also been questioned upon return. The intensity of questioning varied and could be relatively mild, but questioning itself was reported in a broad range of cases. The source had not heard that the ordinary, non-activist returnees known directly or indirectly to them had subsequently been arrested.

6. The source considered the current situation difficult to predict because of rapid changes in state surveillance capacity and the political environment. Organisers, prominent activists and influential social-media users remain particularly exposed to surveillance. However, ordinary citizens may also attract attention if they actively post political content on social media or participate in political demonstrations abroad. The source described a greater degree of contingency and unpredictability than previously and did not identify a clear minimum threshold that would determine whether a returnee attracts the authorities' attention.

7. Electronic devices may be checked upon arrival, but the practice is inconsistent. The source had heard of cases in which phones or other devices were checked and other cases in which no such check took place. The source could not identify a consistent profile explaining the difference: in one example, a high-profile professor returned without incident, whereas a considerably lower-profile person was required to unlock a phone and show its contents to the authorities. If they confiscate electronic devices, they would inspect the content stored on them. However, in some cases at the airport, the inspection has not been thorough. Rather, they simply ask the individual to unlock their device, and then they take a quick look.

8. Passport confiscation has occurred in return cases and is not necessarily followed by prosecution. Based on earlier cases known to the source, passports could be confiscated following return and later restored after approximately six months, while in other cases the confiscation continued indefinitely.

9. Women who return to Iran and do not wear the hijab may currently face a less restrictive environment than in earlier periods. The source knew women who had visited or returned to Iran during the preceding six to seven months, both before and after the recent war, and who had been able to enter government offices and conduct official business without wearing a hijab. It remained uncertain whether this reflected a lasting change or a tactical easing of social restrictions. The source was not aware of any individual case concerning women who have been politically active abroad, but believed politically active women will be treated the same as other active diaspora individuals.

10. Political activity abroad may carry greater risk for persons belonging to certain ethnic or religious minorities. Kurds and Arabs were considered particularly exposed to state surveillance. Kurds have historically attracted significant attention because of the size and organisation of the Kurdish diaspora and the broader political context. Arabs may attract particular attention because of perceived connections with or support from Gulf states; the relatively small size of the politically active Arab diaspora may also make individuals easier to identify. The source considered politically active members of religious minorities, which are subjected to substantial scrutiny by the state, including Baha'is and Jews, to face a higher level of risk than non-minority individuals. This heightened attention to minorities was not regarded as a development originating only after the recent protests. The source had not seen examples of Kurds returning who have faced issues since January 2026.

Treatment of returnees who have criticised the authorities on social media while residing abroad

11. Since the January protests, the Iranian authorities have become more sensitive to political activity among the diaspora, including activity by ordinary individuals rather than only prominent opposition figures. Particular attention is paid to persons promoting the fall of the Islamic Republic or actively supporting military action against Iran. The authorities have recently launched a website called 'Alaj' or 'Remedy', through which persons inside or outside Iran were encouraged to report diaspora Iranians holding such positions. Authorities were also reported to be scanning social-media accounts belonging to diaspora Iranians who had participated in demonstrations and protests abroad. Authorities have claimed that they have prosecuted a number of individuals reported via this platform, but there is no way to verify this claim. The source was not personally aware of any case.

12. This level of interest in ordinary diaspora members was described as relatively new. Following the 2009 Green Movement and the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom protests, diaspora communities also became highly politicised, and some persons returning to Iran were questioned at airports about their participation in protests, contacts and knowledge of other participants. The current situation differs in that surveillance is reportedly more active and extends beyond high-profile political figures to ordinary citizens.

13. Technological developments have made broad surveillance easier and less resource-intensive. The source had received information from contacts in the technology sector inside and outside Iran indicating that the authorities use AI-assisted tools and facial-recognition technology to process large quantities of publicly available video and social-media material. Images from demonstrations, media coverage, Instagram, X/Twitter, YouTube and other online sources can potentially be compared with official identity databases containing photographs of Iranian citizens. The source considered it probable, although they could not confirm it, that the same technology is used to

identify persons participating in demonstrations outside Iranian embassies or at other events abroad.

14. The use of automated tools has lowered the practical threshold for collecting information on ordinary citizens. Previously, limited human resources required the authorities to prioritise prominent activists. Information on a larger number of individuals can now be collected and retained and subsequently retrieved if the person returns to Iran. The consequences may depend on the nature and extent of the individual's social-media activity.

15. The authorities are still more interested in organisers, influencers and persons capable of having a political impact than in individuals who merely participate in an event. For ordinary diaspora members, measures may also serve to deter future participation by increasing the perceived cost of activism. The source did not consider it realistic that the state would pursue every person who had made a single political post. However, a person who posts political material frequently, actively disseminates political messages or has a large number of followers may attract substantially greater attention.

16. The authorities' interest is not limited to original posts. Online material can be collected from a wide range of sources, including European and diaspora media carrying footage of demonstrations. The source considered such media coverage particularly easy to process using facial-recognition technology. The source also noted that access to private communications, including WhatsApp, may be obtained through sophisticated phishing or hacking attempts where the user is induced to provide access. Domestic Iranian applications installed on a phone may provide additional opportunities for state access.

17. Measures against diaspora activism may also have financial consequences. The source referred to a broader list of persons, including many ordinary citizens, identified on the basis of social-media activity or participation in demonstrations abroad. Iran TV reported a list of 1600 individuals identified due to their social media activity. The source had, however, not seen a published list of names. Assets in Iran belonging to more than 1,000 persons had reportedly been blocked. This was distinguished from a separate publicly discussed list of approximately 400 names.[95]

[95] https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/1384699/%D9%81%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%AA-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%82-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D9%87%D9%85%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF

Treatment of returnees who have participated in protests against the Islamic Republic while residing abroad

18. Participation in demonstrations abroad has become a more significant focus of Iranian surveillance since the January protests. Ordinary diaspora members may now be identified from demonstrations even where they did not organise the event. Nevertheless, organisers, prominent activists and influencers remain the primary focus of active surveillance. Ordinary participants are more likely to attract attention where their participation is combined with sustained political activity, repeated social media posts or other visible opposition activity. The source did not have any reliable information on whether authorities monitor gatherings within the Iranians diaspora in general, e.g. people who gather for other reasons than politics that could be considered sensitive to the authorities.

19. Facial-recognition and AI-assisted analysis of videos and photographs available online has increased the authorities' ability to identify participants in protests abroad. Publicly available footage from social media, YouTube, diaspora media and other sources can be scanned and compared with identity photographs. This makes participation in demonstrations potentially identifiable even when an individual is not a public figure.

20. The source had heard that ordinary citizens returning to Iran were increasingly questioned, sometimes for hours. Questions may concern their activities abroad, places visited and persons met. The source did not know of arrests among the ordinary returnees known directly or indirectly to them, but these persons were not prominent or radical political activists. The source therefore could not draw conclusions about the likely treatment of a high-profile protest organiser or similarly prominent opposition activist upon return.

21. Iranian authorities have also reportedly used criminal networks abroad to assist with surveillance and intimidation of prominent diaspora activists. The source's information on this issue derived from media and security reports rather than direct cases. Reported cooperation included Turkish, Eastern European and Canadian criminal groups and, in some reports, Mexican cartels. Such actors may be tasked with following targeted persons, learning their routines and places of residence, and recording their movements. The cases known to the source involved high-profile diaspora media figures or prominent political activists rather than ordinary protesters.

Treatment of rejected asylum applicants

22. The source did not have new general information indicating how Iranian authorities treat a person solely because the person applied for asylum abroad and was subsequently rejected. The source did not personally know rejected asylum applicants who had recently returned to Iran. The limited number of returnees and lack of

systematic monitoring make it difficult to establish a current pattern. Asked if the source could confirm the available information suggesting that the Iranian authorities are aware that some Iranian asylum applicants participate in political activities abroad, including demonstrations, at least in part with the aim of strengthening their asylum claims, and they take this into account when deciding whether to take action against such individuals upon their return to Iran, the source stated that this has traditionally been the case, but the rules of game have changed since January 2026. The source did not have an updated understanding of how they are dealing with such cases at this time.

Treatment of citizens with politically active family members abroad

23. Pressure on politically active diaspora Iranians through relatives living in Iran continues to occur. The source had received direct information concerning high-profile women's rights activists abroad whose relatives in Iran were subjected to intimidation intended to pressure the activists to stop their activities. This had occurred even where the activists themselves held anti-war positions and were also critical of parts of the opposition.

24. Relatives targeted in such cases included parents and siblings and, in one case, the activist's son residing in Iran. The source's direct knowledge concerned high-profile activists and they could not recall cases involving low-profile activists. It was therefore not possible to determine from the information available whether the same practice is used systematically against relatives of ordinary or low-profile diaspora activists.

Meeting with an expert on Iranian law, 28 September 2026

The situation upon return to Iran since the January 2026 protests

1. The political and security deterioration in Iran during 2026 appears to have increased the potential risk for some returnees from Europe, particularly people who already have a profile that could attract the attention of the Iranian authorities. However, current evidence does not establish that every Iranian returning from Europe is automatically at risk simply because they lived in Europe, claimed asylum there, or returned after an unsuccessful asylum claim.

2. The context in 2026 is materially more restrictive than in previous years. Iran experienced major protests from late December 2025 into January 2026, followed by violent repression and extensive restrictions on communications. After US and Israeli strikes began on 28 February 2026, Iranian authorities carried out thousands of arrests of people accused of collaboration, espionage or links with the US and Israel.

3. This heightened security environment is relevant to returnees because Iranian authorities already conduct screening at the border. There is, however, an important

distinction between an ordinary returnee and someone with an additional risk factor. Iranian authorities may question people whom they know have sought asylum about why they claimed asylum and whether they engaged in political or religious activity abroad. Authorities may also obtain information through relatives, communications and social-media activity.

4. Factors such as political opposition activity, demonstrations abroad, critical social-media activity, Kurdish political involvement, religious conversion or proselytising, previous adverse attention from Iranian security authorities, dual nationality, or perceived connections with foreign states may materially alter the assessment.

5. Therefore, the most supportable conclusion as of September 2026 is that the deteriorating political and security situation has increased the significance of a returnee's individual profile rather than creating a uniform risk for all returnees from Europe. In the heightened security environment, a person perceived as politically opposed to the Iranian state, connected to opposition organisations or foreign governments, involved in diaspora activism, or otherwise already of interest to the authorities may face an increased risk of questioning, surveillance, detention or other adverse treatment. By contrast, the available information does not currently demonstrate a general pattern of persecution of people merely because they have returned from Europe or unsuccessfully claimed asylum there.

6. Asked about the situation of women who return to Iran if they have participated in political activities abroad and do not wish to follow Islamic norms upon return, the source stated that the situation is the same as described in the sections about returnees in general.

7. The source was not aware of any cases where returnees have been questioned, detained or prosecuted upon return since January 2026.

The Iranian authorities' conception of political activism

8. Law on Enhanced Penalties for Espionage and Collaboration with the Zionist Regime and Hostile States Against National Security and National Interests may expose certain forms of civic, media, or cross-border engagement to prosecution where authorities consider them contrary to national security. By erasing the distinction between espionage and legitimate civil activity through the criminalisation of communication and engagement, it significantly expands the scope of espionage-related offences. As a result, a broad range of civic activities and contacts with foreign organisations, individuals, or media outlets could potentially fall within the scope of the law where the authorities consider the conduct contrary to national security. The law also covers civic activities and may therefore be applied to a wide range of activities undertaken by Iranian citizens living abroad. For example, an Iranian citizen working with an organisation, academic institution or university that is viewed unfavourably or considered unacceptable by the Iranian authorities may face risks simply because of

their professional or institutional affiliation, particularly if that association becomes known to the authorities. Similarly, an Iranian student conducting academic research or writing a thesis on a politically sensitive subject may attract unwanted attention or be perceived as engaging in activities contrary to the interests of the authorities. In such circumstances, even legitimate professional, academic or civic activities undertaken abroad could expose individuals to surveillance, questioning, harassment, detention or prosecution, potentially making it unsafe for them to return to Iran.

9. Under previous legislation, no foreign government was expressly designated as a "hostile" state. This law explicitly identifies two entities as hostile and grants the Supreme National Security Council the authority to determine whether any other state, regime, or group should be designated as hostile, as well as when such designation should cease. This significantly broadens the scope of the concept of a "hostile" entity and creates considerable legal uncertainty. As a result, civil society actors who engage with individuals, organisations, or institutions associated with—or funded by—states or entities that have been, or may subsequently be, designated as hostile could face an increased risk of criminal investigation or prosecution under the law.

Rejected asylum applicants

10. Asked if the source could confirm the available information suggesting that the Iranian authorities are aware that some Iranian asylum applicants participate in political activities abroad, including demonstrations, at least in part with the aim of strengthening their asylum claims, and they take this into account when deciding whether to take action against such individuals upon their return to Iran, the source stated that the information in the question can be confirmed in qualified terms. Iranian authorities appear to be aware that some Iranian asylum seekers abroad engage in demonstrations, social-media activity or other political activity partly or wholly to strengthen asylum claims. The authorities may take the nature and visibility of those activities into account when assessing a returnee. However, the available evidence does not establish a general practice of adverse treatment solely because an individual applied for asylum abroad, nor does opportunistic participation in demonstrations automatically lead to adverse treatment. The central issue is the authorities' perception of the individual and their activities—including whether those activities are known or discoverable, their prominence and nature, any previous adverse interest, and whether the authorities perceive the returnee as a genuine political or security threat.

Targeted profiles

11. Available information indicates that Iranian authorities are more likely to pay attention to individuals with a higher or already-established profile, rather than ordinary returnees. Profiles attracting greater scrutiny include:
    - Political activists and prominent dissidents, particularly organisers, leaders or regular/high-profile participants in anti-government protests.

- Individuals already known to the authorities, including those with active or pending legal/security cases, arrest warrants, previous detention, or a history of adverse attention.
- Journalists, human-rights defenders, lawyers, academics and opposition figures, especially those publicly critical of the government.
- Social-media influencers or activists with large followings, particularly where posts are political, critical of the authorities, go viral, or receive significant media attention.
- People connected to opposition organisations or networks, including some ethnic-minority political movements.
- High-profile activists abroad, particularly those repeatedly participating in demonstrations or receiving media exposure.

12. The authorities do not appear to systematically monitor every Iranian abroad. Visibility, previous history, political significance, audience size and the nature of the person's activities are important factors in determining the level of attention.

Reprisals for online activity abroad

13. Since January 2026, the heightened political tensions and repression in Iran have increased the relevance of online criticism. Iranian authorities monitor online activity and may subject returnees whose criticism has come to their attention to questioning, harassment, arrest, detention, ill-treatment or criminal charges. However, not every person who criticised the authorities online abroad will face reprisals. Risk is higher where the criticism is repeated or prominent, reaches a large audience, goes viral, or where the individual already has a political, activist, minority or other profile of interest to the authorities. Low-profile online activity that has not attracted official attention is less likely to result in adverse treatment.

Reprisals for participation in protests abroad

14. Since January 2026, participation in anti-IRI protests abroad can create a risk on return**,** particularly where the activity has come to the Iranian authorities' attention. Documented forms of adverse treatment associated with perceived anti-government activity include questioning, harassment, arrest, detention, criminal prosecution, travel restrictions, and potentially torture or other ill-treatment. However, the source could not identify reliable, publicly documented 2026 cases specifically confirming that an Iranian was arrested after returning solely because they had participated in an overseas protest.

15. The risk is considered higher for organisers, prominent or repeated participants, people photographed or identified in media, opposition activists, and persons already known to the authorities. Ordinary participants who attend infrequently, have no role and receive no publicity are generally considered less likely to be identified.

Examination of electronic devices upon return

16. Checks can extend beyond social-media accounts. Iranian authorities have reportedly confiscated or searched mobile phones, laptops and other electronic devices, and in some cases requested passwords. If a returnee is detained or otherwise attracts suspicion, authorities may conduct a more detailed examination of their devices and communications. This could expose downloaded books, documents, photographs, messages, contacts, browsing material or other stored files, particularly if they contain political, religious or other material considered sensitive by the authorities.

17. However, there is no evidence that all returnees routinely have their devices or downloaded books checked; more intrusive searches appear particularly relevant where an individual has already attracted official attention or suspicion.

Monitoring of Iranian citizens living abroad since January 2026

18. There are indications that monitoring of Iranians abroad intensified during the heightened political and security tensions of 2026, although there is no evidence of systematic mass surveillance of all Iranians overseas.

19. Attention is particularly directed toward prominent dissidents, political activists, journalists, human-rights defenders, opposition-linked individuals, organisers, influential figures, and social-media users with large audiences. People with previous adverse interest from Iranian authorities or links to organisations regarded as hostile may also receive greater scrutiny.

20. Iranian authorities monitor anti-IRI demonstrations abroad, including through observation, photography or filming in some circumstances. However, available evidence does not indicate that every participant is identified or monitored individually.

21. A participant does not necessarily have to be an organiser, but visibility matters. Organisers, speakers, frequent participants, people carrying a prominent message, individuals photographed or reported in the media, and persons already known to the authorities are more likely to attract attention. Infrequent ordinary participants without a particular role or media exposure are generally less likely to be identified.

22. Authorities particularly pay attention to content considered anti-government, supportive of opposition movements, critical of senior officials, related to protests or human-rights abuses, minority rights, or perceived cooperation with hostile foreign governments or media. The size of the audience, frequency of activity and existing profile of the individual are relevant. Even liking or sharing political or Iran-related material can potentially attract attention. However, isolated likes or shares by a low-profile individual are less likely to attract the same scrutiny as repeated posting, original content, viral material or activity by an already prominent person.

23. Monitoring is not confined strictly to formal political protests. Authorities may take an interest in diaspora networks, organisations or gatherings perceived as connected with opposition activity, minority movements, civil society, journalism or other sensitive issues. However, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that ordinary non-political social gatherings of Iranians abroad are routinely monitored.

Treatment of family members since the January 2026 protests

24. Since the January 2026 protests, available evidence indicates that Iranian authorities may use family members in Iran to exert pressure on politically active Iranians abroad, although this is not applied systematically to every activist or family. The January 2026 crackdown involved extensive arrests and summonses, while broader reporting documents the continued use of reprisals against relatives of dissidents abroad.

25. Reported measures include phone calls and warnings, surveillance, summons and interrogation, threats, employment or financial pressure, travel bans/passport confiscation, arrest, prosecution and detention. In more serious cases, torture or other ill-treatment has been reported. The intensity varies considerably and can increase when the activist abroad continues or becomes more prominent.

26. The evidence primarily concerns close family members—parents, spouses, children and siblings. Other relatives can potentially be affected, particularly where they maintain contact with the activist, but there is substantially less evidence of systematic targeting of more distant relatives such as cousins or uncles.

27. The risk is greater where the person abroad is a prominent or persistent dissident, protest organiser, journalist, human-rights activist, opposition member, or otherwise publicly identifiable critic of the authorities. Iranian authorities have also threatened relatives in Iran in connection with the activities of well-known online activists abroad. Low-profile or isolated political activity is less clearly associated with reprisals against relatives.

Annex 2 – Terms of Reference (ToR)

Iran – Update on Treatment upon Return

1. Iranian authorities' treatment of returnees upon return to Iran
   1.1. Treatment of returnees who have criticised the authorities on social media while residing abroad
   1.2. Treatment of returnees who have participated in protests against the Islamic Republic while residing abroad
   1.3. Treatment of rejected asylum applicants
2. Iranian authorities' treatment of citizens with politically active family members abroad